

One of the first acts in cultural analysis is setting up the terms of what will be studied. This is inevitably an inductive/deductive process in which the researcher starts with a broad intuitive sense of what needs to be defined and then tries to set up terms, boundaries, limits so that the work can move forward. But in the process, boundaries may change and definitions may need to be changed. The very definition of the field shapes what kinds of questions can be raised. The downside is that the work being done can simply be circular, and finally banal. The upside is that new ideas may come forward, and thus genuinely new knowledge can be generated.

My specific concern is the field of experimental film and video. What do we mean by “experimental”? That varies a bit with different historians and critics and artists having slightly different views,

When I first arrived at the Radio/Television/Film department at Northwestern, there was a common operating definition that films could be divided into dramatic narratives, documentaries, and experimental.

Fred camper definition

New York's Cinema 16, founded in the postwar era as a showcase and forum for independent film, organized in 1953 a symposium on “Poetry and the Film” that offered the first real public debate on the theory behind what was then considered experimental film. significantly, the first record of the avant garde film project is an aesthetic statement which addresses itself to political concerns largely in terms of stating its antagonistic relation to the